

## U.S.-CHINA MILITARY RELATIONS: UNSTABLE, BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The United States, the current superpower, and China, the rapidly ascendant and growing more assertive power, will dominate the global economic, political, and security spheres in the 21st century. Hence, the U.S.-China relationship is the most important bilateral relationship in the world. Since normalization of relations in 1979, the U.S. and China have made progress in economic and political cooperation to reach the goal of a positive and comprehensive relationship. However, U.S.-China defense relations have lagged behind, and is perhaps the weakest link between the two nations. Since 1989, U.S.-China military relations have been suspended or placed on hold at least six times.

Lacking strategic trust, a common threat, and a shared history of security cooperation, the future defense relationship will likely remain up and down. This paper analyzes the evolution of the U.S.-China military relationship, and implications for future U.S. defense policy options. Ultimately, the U.S. should consider changing U.S. defense strategy to a more assertive engagement approach focused on non-traditional defense cooperation areas to respond to China's continued reluctance to engage.





## U.S.-CHINA MILITARY RELATIONS: UNSTABLE, BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE

I can tell you that the U.S. Department of Defense wants both what President Obama and Hu want: sustained and reliable military-to-military contacts.<sup>1</sup>

—Robert M. Gates  
Secretary of Defense

A top priority of United States defense policy toward China is to mature the U.S.-China military-to-military relationship in order to prevent unintended confrontation as a result of miscommunication or miscalculation. However, despite years of U.S. attempts at increasing military engagement with China there has been little sustained progress. China, particularly the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has not responded to the U.S. efforts in kind, but has routinely halted military cooperation as a means to retaliate against Chinese-claimed "U.S. wrong doings." In the meantime, China continues to dispute with the U.S. over U.S. military activities in the Chinese-claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and challenge U.S. engagement in the Western Pacific. If U.S.-China military relations do not make significant improvement, more conflicts and crises will be on the way, putting U.S.-China relations and peace and stability in the Western Pacific in jeopardy.

China has rapidly emerged as a key security player on the global stage. There are signs that China is shedding the long-held Deng Xiaoping doctrine of "tao-guang yang-hui (hide our capacities and bind our time)", and moving out on a more activist "go out" strategy to fulfill increased domestic needs and secure Chinese interests.<sup>2</sup> China's growing confidence, as the 2nd largest economy in the world fueled by 30 years of unprecedented economic growth, has also resulted in a more assertive military diplomacy strategy.<sup>3</sup> No longer willing to accept U.S. terms for military relations, China

has stepped up demands for U.S. to remove what they call the three principal obstacles in U.S.-China military relations: arms sales to Taiwan, U.S. military operations in sensitive areas off China's coast, and the U.S. 2000 National Defense Authorization Act restricting "inappropriate exposure" of the PLA to certain operational areas and requiring annual reports on the military power of the PRC and contacts with the PLA.<sup>4</sup>

China's intentions for military relations are tied closely to the ruling Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) fundamental goals of regime survivability and domestic stability. In China, military diplomacy is a tool of statecraft, and is intrinsically linked to PRC national security objectives.<sup>5</sup> The CCP's imperative to retain power and keep the domestic population satisfied requires sustained economic growth, and access to regional and global energy resources.<sup>6</sup> Already surpassing U.S. as the world's largest energy consumer, China's energy demands are driving the PLA to have a more activist strategy to protect strategic resources.<sup>7</sup>

The more assertive Chinese strategy described by Elizabeth C. Economy, Director for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, as a foreign policy revolution and a game changer is impacting the entire U.S.-China bilateral relationship.<sup>8</sup> China is now pushing out in economic, political, and military spheres to proactively shape the environment. Consequently, China is more frequently resisting American diplomatic requests on a broad front from raising its currency rates to pressuring North Korea to stop provocations against South Korea.<sup>9</sup> Increased friction in the overall relationship has extended to military relations, which are entering another challenging period of more tension and conflict.

This paper examines the nature and evolution of U.S.-China military relationship, assesses the recent Chinese strategy shift, and implications for U.S. defense policy. Based on past performance, current U.S. and Chinese policies for military relations are unfortunately unlikely to produce momentum or sustained positive results. Accordingly, the absence of reliable military contacts also increases the risks of a small-unintended military event causing a greater conflict. Therefore, U.S. will be compelled to continue to follow an engagement rather than a containment strategy, which would inevitably lead to Chinese isolation. However, the U.S. in pursuing an engagement military relations strategy should shift military exchanges to more non-traditional defense areas, where U.S and China have mutual interests.

### Background

Since the normalization of relations in 1979, U.S. and China militaries have conducted engagement on and off again for the past thirty plus years. In the early 1980s, U.S.-China defense relations were formally established due to a common threat, Soviet Union, and shared security concerns.<sup>10</sup> The Cold War dominated U.S. strategic thought and the U.S. wanted to contain the Soviets, while the Chinese already involved in a hot war with the Soviets wanted to check the growing Soviet military power. Any historical concerns U.S. had with communist China were set aside, and the U.S. began to see military ties with China as a strategic advantage.

After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, debate within the U.S defense establishment intensified on the possibility of a U.S.-China defense relationship to counter Soviet Union's aggressive foreign policy. In 1980, former U.S. Defense Secretary Harold Brown visited Beijing, and established the foundation for a relationship with the PLA.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, a key principle of the relationship was building up China

military capability, and the initial agreements consisted of furthering strategic dialogue through high-level visits, arms sales from U.S. to China, and increasing PLA capabilities through functional exchanges.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in 1981 the U.S. policy ban on selling arms to China was lifted, and U.S.-China defense relations were underway.<sup>13</sup>

The rest of the 1980s was a relatively strong decade for U.S.-China military relations until of course the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. Throughout the 1980s, U.S. sold numerous weapons to China to include artillery radars, torpedoes, jet fighter packages, and upgrading artillery ammunition production facilities.<sup>14</sup> During the Reagan administration, U.S. policy was also changed to enable China to commercially buy defense items from key U.S. defense manufacturers, and the PLA bought 24 Sikorsky Blackhawk transport helicopters and 5 General Electric turbine engines for naval destroyers.<sup>15</sup> Along with defense sales, many military exchanges occurred in the 1980s focused on professionally developing the PLA in the basic areas of training, maintenance, and logistics. All this military cooperation came to an abrupt end in June 1989 at Tiananmen Square with the Chinese government and PLA crackdown of the pro-democracy movement. Consequently, the U.S. government with strong congressional backing suspended military to military contacts and arms sales with China.

The end of the Cold War and a reduced Soviet military threat transformed the international security environment. With the initial drivers for security cooperation between U.S. and China lacking, the military relationship was on a shaky foundation and a rocky future was in store. The re-surfacing of the China-Taiwan problem in the 1990s complicated matters as well as the Taiwan democracy and economy flourished,

and Taipei political leaders stepped up calls for independence.<sup>16</sup> Possible Taiwan independence was and is the number one obstacle for improved U.S./China relations, since Taiwan is a core domestic security interest for China, and U.S. has conflicting obligations under the U.S. Taiwan Relations Act.

Despite the Taiwan obstacle, the Clinton administration and their national security strategy of engagement worked to restore relations with China, and high-level defense contacts began again in 1993.<sup>17</sup> However, this round of defense cooperation was marred by the China-Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995 and 1996 with PLA demonstrations of force and missile tests, and U.S. response of deploying aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait area. By the end of the decade, military relations slightly improved again due to presidential summits, and the policy intent to form a U.S-China strategic partnership.<sup>18</sup>

With momentum building again in the relationship, U.S. and China signed the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) on January 19, 1998. This agreement was intended to create a mechanism for the two nations to build confidence, improve communication, and avoid maritime accidents.<sup>19</sup> MMCA was patterned after the successful 1972 U.S.-Soviet Union Incidents-at-Sea Agreement (INCSEA), and is an operator-level exchange to discuss issues of ship and aircraft safety. MMCA's intent was to provide a venue to encourage dialogue between U.S. and Chinese naval and air forces operating near each other.<sup>20</sup> While MMCA talks continue to this day, they have not averted maritime crisis events, since the MMCA process lacks formal "rules of the seas" language approved by both U.S and China.

The start of the 21st century saw increased friction between U.S. and China militaries, since there was a growing concern inside U.S. and China policy circles that our security interests were diverging. U.S. policy insiders especially the U.S. Congress were becoming more concerned about PLA modernization programs, aggressive intentions, and lack of transparency in defense strategy. Furthermore, Congress enacted legislation to prohibit arms sales, limit operational areas of cooperation, and required DoD to produce annual reports on China's military power similar to the Soviet military power report during the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> In return, China strategists began to describe anti-China thought in the U.S. as part of a "China threat theory" movement to justify sustained large U.S. defense budgets.

From this unstable backdrop, another crisis event, the PLA Navy F-8 fighter collision with a U.S. Navy EP-3 reconnaissance plane in April 2001, would reset the military relationship again.<sup>22</sup> The EP-3 collision was a serious international incident, in which a U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance surveillance plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet. The U.S. EP-3 crew conducted an emergency landing on China's Hainan Island, and the PLA detained the crew for 11 days.<sup>23</sup> During the first couple weeks of the crisis, PLA officials likely under orders from Beijing refused to answer phone calls from U.S. military senior leaders, and de-escalate the tense situation. Even with nearly two decades of U.S./China defense relations and established confidence-building measures like MMCA, it was apparent there was little trust between the two militaries.

After the infamous EP-3 incident, the U.S. and China resumed guardedly the Defense Consultative Talks (DCT) and senior leader visits.<sup>24</sup> President George Bush hosted visits for PRC President Jiang Zemin and then Vice President Hu, which opened

the door for further senior military leader engagements. In 2003, General Cao Gangchuan, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, visited the Pentagon, and the following year General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, traveled to China.<sup>25</sup> Despite the return of the high-level symbolic state visits, military contacts overall were limited, and were more political in nature rather than substantive operational exchanges.<sup>26</sup>

In early 2010, China suspended military contacts again due to the announcement of another round of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. After months of prodding by the U.S. government, China begrudgingly agreed to normalize military relations in October 2010. Meanwhile, the Obama administration's engagement strategy has sought better relations with China. President Obama and President Jintao have signed joint official statements declaring their intent to "advance sustained and reliable military to military relations in the future."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, DoD Secretary Gates has urged China to sustain military relations, and halt future suspensions by de-linking Taiwan arms sales from defense relations.<sup>28</sup> For now, China is willing to start military relations at a gradual pace, but has placed the burden on U.S. for more consistent cooperation by removing the core obstacles of U.S arms sales to Taiwan, eliminating U.S. reconnaissance off the China mainland coast, and dropping the China threat theory from U.S. official documents.<sup>29</sup>

### Why Does the U.S. Engage?

The U.S. military promotes engagement and military relations with another nation as a natural extension of American culture and values. U.S. military leaders value open and transparent military relations as a means to project American power and shape the security environment. Moreover, the U.S. military believes military engagement is a

means to understand and communicate intentions. Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described this need to engage for a professional military clearly when he stated: “A common bond transcends warriors-the desire to serve and to protect, the willingness to sacrifice and, quite frankly, the loneliness of command. Military-to-military exchanges can act as forums for broader understanding, harmonious interaction and useful communication.”<sup>30</sup> The American belief in positive military engagement forms the foundation to establish trust and respect between militaries.

Applied to China, U.S. policy makers seek steady military relations as part of the overall bilateral relationship to better understand and shape Chinese actions. The U.S. military is concerned with the PLA’s rapid military modernization. U.S. policy makers want to know why the PLA is developing in such a scale presumably exceeding the basic China security requirements, and could be directed against the U.S military. Therefore, the intent of U.S. military engagement is to increase communication so that PLA intentions are understood related to U.S. security interests.<sup>31</sup>

The emphasis on military engagement is an enduring hallmark of U.S. foreign policy and is a top priority for not only DoD, but also for the U.S. State Department. Describing the importance of positive U.S.-China military relations, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in a recent speech urged her Chinese counterparts for more engagement with the following remarks:

We need more high-level visits, more joint exercises, more exchanges from our professional military organizations, and other steps to build that trust, understanding of intentions, and familiarity. This will require China to overcome its reluctance at times to join us in building a stable and transparent military-to-military relationship.<sup>32</sup>

Secretary Clinton’s comments are an example of consistent U.S. policy over decades to press China to expand military relations at all levels.



### Why is China Seemingly Reluctant to Engage?

The Chinese are well aware of the U.S. emphasis on military engagement and many Chinese officials believe it is an American “over concern”. The perceived U.S. desire to shape Chinese actions has made the PLA weary of increasing military-to-military exchanges. Chinese military leaders view the American military as too eager to engage, which confirms their suspicions of American intent to control and dominate the PLA. Consequently, the U.S. military’s relentless drive to increase military contacts may actually work to make the PLA less reluctant to engage.

Historically, China has resisted more military engagement with U.S. fundamentally due to the different cultural approach the PLA takes with military relations. China’s military diplomacy relies on a top-down approach where strategic dialogue generates trust, and allows further tactical or functional military contacts.<sup>33</sup> David Finkelstein, an expert on U.S-China military relations, describes this concept as the PLA achieving agreement on the big issues “as a precondition for any substantive military activities.”<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, the U.S. values a bottom-up approach with lower-level military exchanges building trust and setting the conditions for greater cooperation.<sup>35</sup> Since China places agreement on strategic issues, as a key first step, and China and the U.S. do not agree on core issues such as Taiwan, China is reluctant to sustain consistent military relations.

Another key factor limiting further PLA engagement is the belief that the weak should not reveal military capabilities to the strong. Since China currently sees the U.S. military as a more dominant force, they are reluctant to provide opportunities via functional exchanges for the U.S. to view PLA capability gaps and shortfalls.<sup>36</sup> In the past, the PLA has been more willing to cooperate with smaller and weaker militaries,

which do not threaten PRC interests.<sup>37</sup> However, mistrust of U.S. intentions coupled with a powerful U.S. military presence in Asia-Pacific, leads the PLA to question whether more military interaction now while they are relatively weaker best serves their interests.

Moreover, Chinese military diplomacy is considered “strategic political activity”<sup>38</sup> and is used as diplomatic leverage in the bilateral relationship with the U.S. government. Since China perceives the U.S. values military relations comparatively more, China is more willing to stall increased military contacts to achieve other political concessions. Rising Chinese nationalism and growing PLA confidence makes military relations an even more attractive PRC bargaining tool, since the cost of not increasing military contacts, seems low compared to advancing China’s strategic interests.

#### Military Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics

The PLA is the security arm of the CCP, and military diplomacy is not a separate activity apart from foreign relations. The PLA is not allowed to conduct foreign relations on its own.<sup>39</sup> The PLA’s objectives for military relations are intrinsically linked to state communist party objectives. China President Hu Jintao stated the PLA’s place clearly with his directive to the PLA “to be loyal to the party, love the people, serve the country; devote yourself to party’s goals; and value honor.”<sup>40</sup> A review of PLA military diplomacy goals indicates the top goals are related to party goals of securing national sovereignty, countering Taiwan independence, and opposing imperialism. As Kenneth Allen and Heidi Holz note in their analysis of PLA military diplomacy goals, the American valued aspects of military dialogue and functional exchanges in a military relationship are less important for CCP and PLA goals.<sup>41</sup> China interests will continue to

drive military diplomacy rather than an independent objective to mature China/U.S. military relations.

China's grand strategy has also impacted PLA military diplomacy with a shift to a more assertive role in shaping the international system. China's leaders believe their time as come after centuries of humiliation, and see the next two decades as a "strategic window of opportunity" to further China's peaceful rise as a great power.<sup>42</sup> This more proactive strategy was on display in China's 2008 Defense White Paper with the following blunt assessment:

China has become an important member of the international system and the future and destiny of China have been increasingly closely connected with the international community. China cannot develop in isolation from the rest of the world, nor can the world enjoy prosperity and stability without China.<sup>43</sup>

In line with the more expansive strategic guidance, the CMC directed the PLA to take on a greater role in securing China's strategic interests outside the China mainland.<sup>44</sup> The new directed "historic PLA missions" reflected the change in PRC leadership's view of the global environment, and the intent to ensure the PLA was in line with CCP objectives.<sup>45</sup>

China's growing assertive behavior has shifted their diplomacy and military relations to focus more on preserving core interests. Beginning in 2000, Chinese official media started to use the term, "core interests" to indicate issues that are of vital importance to the government. Originally, official core interests were related to only issues of sovereignty and territorial interests, but over time as China's power increased the concept included other national security issues and continued economic development.<sup>46</sup> By 2010, People's Daily, an official Chinese press source, had published nearly an article a day, which mentioned core interests in relation to PRC

diplomacy.<sup>47</sup> Michael Swaine has described this growing trend of the use of the term core interests as a warning to the U.S. and other nations to not challenge China's core interests.<sup>48</sup>

China's increasing attention to core interests in the diplomacy arena shaped the PLA's position on blaming the U.S. for not removing core obstacles in the defense relationship. China through official statements and senior leader visits over the past couple of years has consistently brought up the following core obstacles: U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, U.S. warships and aircraft intelligence gathering in China's EEZ, U.S. legislative restrictions on China military relations, and lack of strategic trust. The obstacles enable China senior leaders like Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff to declare, "the barrier between U.S.-China military relations is not built by China."<sup>49</sup> From the Chinese perspective, the core obstacles like the core interests are seen as non-negotiable, and a necessary precondition for further military engagement.

#### Waiting on the Next Crisis

Based on the past rollercoaster track record of U.S.-China military engagement, it is likely another military crisis will come along and again derail relations. China, especially within the past year, has become more assertive in their demands for a reduction of U.S. military reconnaissance operations in the Western Pacific, and routinely shadow and conduct reactions to U.S. ships and aircraft.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, MMCA discussions have failed to deliver common rules of interaction on the high seas to prevent the likelihood of inadvertent clashes.

Using their official news agency, Xinhua, and public diplomacy, China has consistently placed the blame on the U.S. for stalled military relations. Additionally, as China's economic and military power continues to rise, there has been a corresponding

perception of less PLA appreciation for U.S. military exchanges.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, China's growing confidence combined with the lack of trust in the military bilateral relationship creates ripe conditions for another military crisis.

A likely trigger for future Chinese suspensions of military contacts is an incident with U.S. reconnaissance assets operating in China's claimed EEZ. China has consistently made clear its objections to U.S. air and maritime reconnaissance in its EEZ, which extends 200 miles from the China mainland coast. The last major military crisis in China's EEZ was the USNS *Impeccable* incident in March 2009, 75 miles south of the island of Hainan, when "five Chinese vessels shadowed and aggressively maneuvered in dangerously close proximity to USNS *Impeccable*, in an apparent coordinated effort to harass the US ocean surveillance ship while it was conducting routine operations in international waters."<sup>52</sup> Dennis Blair, then Director of National Intelligence (DNI), in testimony to the Senate Armed Service Committee called the crisis the most serious since the 2001 EP-3 incident.<sup>53</sup>

China denied any wrong doing in the USNS *Impeccable* incident, and described their operational response as legitimate defense of its EEZ. China's position at the time was based on their interpretation of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which requires marine scientific research in an EEZ to have the consent of the EEZ owned nation. In response to China's EEZ justification, the U.S. maintained the long-held position that the USNS ships like the *Impeccable* were conducting hydrographic and military survey, which does not require consent under another UNCLOS provision.<sup>54</sup> The two opposing interpretations of UNCLOS and international law will continue to be a source of mistrust between the two militaries. With China in the

last year proclaiming the South China Sea a core security interest along with Taiwan and Tibet, the next likely area for an EEZ incident is Chinese “sensitive areas” off Hainan Island in the South China Sea.<sup>55</sup>

#### What is the Current U.S. Policy Response?

As stated in the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) of May 2010, the U.S. government “will continue to pursue a positive, constructive, and comprehensive relationship with China.”<sup>56</sup> The U.S. engagement strategy encourages China to take a leadership role and work with the U.S. on issues of global concern. Other official U.S. senior government speeches indicate U.S. overall policy goal is to have China become a responsible global stakeholder supporting a stable security environment in the Asia-Pacific region. Related to defense relations, the NSS declares better communication between the U.S. and China militaries is an objective to reduce mistrust.<sup>57</sup>

The U.S.-China Joint Statement of November 17, 2009 between President Obama and President Jintao also reaffirms the U.S. intent to increase the level and frequency of military exchanges. The Joint Statement proclaims for the two militaries “the goal of these efforts is to improve their capabilities for practical cooperation and foster greater understanding of each other’s intentions and of the international security environment.”<sup>58</sup> Additional language in the Joint Statement included U.S. encouragement of a greater role for China in world affairs, and respect for China’s core interests.<sup>59</sup> Overall, U.S. stated national policy goals over the past several presidential administrations have remained committed to a comprehensive engagement strategy and greater military exchanges with China.

The most recent National Defense Strategy (NDS) of 2008 produced by the President George Bush administration endorsed continued peacetime engagement with

the PLA, but adopted a hedge strategy as well to counter China. The NDS soberly assesses China's rise and implications in the following manner:

China is one ascendant state with the potential for competing with the United States. For the foreseeable future, we will need to hedge against China's growing military modernization and the impact of its strategic choices upon international Security.<sup>60</sup>

While adding the hedge strategy, the NDS supported continued strategic and military dialogue to improved understanding and mitigate the risk of miscalculation.<sup>61</sup>

Published in 2010 and reflecting Obama administration's engagement strategy, USPACOM's theater strategic guidance for China is nested with DoD's intent for positive military relations with a key objective to mature the U.S.-China military to military relationship. Tied to the strategic intent to mature the U.S-China military relationship, the following subordinate USPACOM goals are listed in the theater strategy: (1) Sustain a military-to-military relationship to prevent miscommunication and miscalculation; (2) Pursue opportunities for increased military cooperation in areas of mutual interest and (3) Monitor China's military modernization program and prepare accordingly.<sup>62</sup> From DoD guidance down to USPACOM strategy, it is clear that U.S. defense policy endorses more military-to-military contacts with China.

Since the last Chinese suspension of defense relations in January 2010, U.S. defense officials have increased pressure on China to maintain reliable military-to-military relations. At the Shangri-La Dialogue talks in Singapore on June 5, 2010, Secretary Defense Gates stepped up demands for the PRC to understand the cost of no military relations. Understanding China's desire to connect Taiwan arms sale to military contacts, Secretary Gates in his speech pushed the Chinese to sever the link with the following direct comments:

Taiwan arms sales over the decades, in fact, since normalization, have not impeded closer political and economic ties, no closer ties in other security arenas of mutual interest, which I know all too well. Only in the military-to-military arena has progress on mutual security issues been held hostage over something that is, quite frankly, old news. It has been clear to everyone now, more than 30 years after normalization, that interruptions in our military relationship with China will not change U.S. policy toward Taiwan.<sup>63</sup>

Notwithstanding his criticism of China's approach to sustaining military engagement, Secretary Gates finished the speech by again reinforcing the U.S. commitment to improving defense relations, and stated they were essential to regional security.<sup>64</sup>

### Risks of Engagement with China

Frustrated by the lack of progress in the military relations, many engagement skeptics have questioned the U.S. insistence on increasing U.S.-China military contacts. The key argument presented against further cooperation is the lack of Chinese defense transparency, and relatively little reciprocity in the type and value of military exchanges. Brigadier General Charles Hooper, former U.S. Defense Attaché in Beijing, in his essay *Going Nowhere Slowly: U.S.-China Military Relations 1994-2001* described U.S. perception of PLA transparency in this way, when he stated:

While PLA delegations to the United States received unprecedented access and exposure to facilities, equipment, and personnel, U.S. delegations experienced much different treatment. In keeping with the writings of Sun Tzu, secrecy and deception are fundamental tenets of Chinese military strategy; the PLA, which evolved from a guerilla force, is one of the most secretive institutions in China.<sup>65</sup>

Engagement critics contend that the PLA has learned much more from the U.S. military to increase its warfighting capability against Taiwan now and potentially U.S. later, but the U.S. has learned little substantive on PLA intentions and true capabilities.

Another risk of increasing military contacts with China is past attempts to further the military relationship have not increased greater mutual understanding or better



communication between the militaries. In the major crisis events from EP-3 to USNS *Impeccable* incident, China senior military leaders have not returned U.S. defense official phone calls or made any attempts to use personal contacts with U.S. military officers to mitigate the danger of military escalation.<sup>66</sup> The PLA must wait for CCP political guidance before acting which may take a few days, and contacting U.S. military officials will likely be forbidden unless specially approved by the CMC.<sup>67</sup> Chinese interests will dictate the PLA response to the crisis rather than a U.S. notion of military engagement leading to better communication and cooperation.

#### Analysis of U.S. Policy Options

Based on a historical review, assessment of PLA strategy shift, and the current status of relations, three main policy options emerge to confront the unstable nature of U.S./China military engagement. U.S. can maintain the status quo policy of gradual military engagement, and endure the on-again and off-again nature of defense relations with China. Alternatively, the U.S. could halt military exchanges, other than strategic dialogues and symbolic senior leader visits. Finally, the U.S. could change the policy to a more assertive strategic approach for military engagement, based on more U.S. alliance engagement, and a shift in focus of U.S.-China military-to-military relations to non-traditional defense areas. To determine the best policy, each of these three options will be described as a strategy from the ends, ways, means perspective and assessed by the criteria of feasibility, acceptability, and suitability (FAS). The FAS test measures whether a policy will work with feasibility defined as testing if we have the means or resources available; acceptability examines whether key stakeholders will accept the policy; and suitability tests whether the policy will achieve the strategic end.

The first option is to urge China to gradually increase military contacts with the U.S. military and develop a mature military relationship in the long term in order to prevent miscommunication and miscalculation.<sup>68</sup> The ultimate goal of this policy is to improve cooperation and foster greater understanding of each other's intentions and of the international security environment.<sup>69</sup>

The ways or concept to implement this so-called status quo policy is to conduct military exchanges at all levels on defense related issues. The functional exchanges include senior-leader engagements, junior officer exchanges, and observation of unit training to build cooperative capacity. The current strategic approach applies pressure on China to increase military engagement, but in practice has enabled China to determine the scope and type of military contacts. U.S. will remain patient with China during periods of turbulence, and wait for military relations to either start back up or improve gradually. During the military-to-military suspensions, State and DoD use diplomacy to persuade China to de-link military relations from Taiwan arms sales and other core obstacles that prevent increased military cooperation.<sup>70</sup>

Enduring the fragility of U.S.-China relations requires the means of a strong U.S. forward military force presence in Asia as a security backstop mitigating the inconsistent progress of military relations. Strong economic links with China is required as well to provide a foundation for positive U.S./China's relations. The current engagement policy will require robust diplomatic resources and patience to foster a long-term relationship. Military engagement resources will include routine military delegation visits, and some functional military exchanges based on what military contacts PLA is willing to move forward on to improve the relationship.

The status quo option is feasible, based on the current U.S. military structure and resources in place for the USPACOM theater campaign plan. Despite two ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, USPACOM has had adequate military forces to maintain a strong forward presence and an active military engagement program in the AOR. The status quo has been acceptable to most policy decision-makers in the U.S. government to include the U.S. Congress, since it combines elements of an engagement policy and a hedge strategy. Liberal policy advocates endorse the engagement strategy since the U.S. is attempting to reach out and shape China's military. Anti-China hawks embrace a strong U.S. military posture, and have not objected too strenuously to U.S. military engagement with China, since little cooperation has been obtained. U.S. allies will support this strategy, since it builds up allies in the region, but does not overly antagonize China.

However, the status quo policy fails the suitability test, since the past track record has had a limited chance of success of meeting the objective of maturing the U.S.-China military relationship. With this strategy, China has largely dictated the pace and type of military cooperation. When it has been in China's interests to engage they have, but when it is not they are more than willing to sacrifice any gains made in the U.S. military relationship. Therefore, our current strategy will not likely prevent a future military crisis or result in greater cooperation.

The second U.S. policy option to consider takes a more skeptical view of the U.S.-China military relationship and calls for halting military exchanges, other than strategic dialogues and symbolic senior leader visits. The policy argument is hinged on the belief that U.S.-China military-to-military contacts are not worth the time and energy,

and may be counter-productive by accelerating PLA modernization.<sup>71</sup> The strategic ends are U.S. interest focused with the objective of U.S. recognized as the dominant security actor in the Western Pacific.

The option of U.S. limiting military contacts would require more aggressive ways in the U.S. strategic approach towards China in order to dictate terms and pace of the military relationship. If China pushes back, U.S. would call suspend military relations other than limited senior-leader visits, and increase U.S. military presence in Western Pacific. Combined with increased military engagement and exercises with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, the strategy would send a clear signal to China of U.S. resolve, and favorably impact CMC decision-making process on future military relations. More resources are required to implement this option, due to the build-up of U.S. forces in Western Pacific and more engagement with U.S. allies.

Based on the increased means, this policy option is marginally feasible over the long-term, since the U.S. economy and budget deficits will not favor larger DoD budgets or increased U.S. military forces in USPACOM. The current U.S. administration will not find the policy acceptable, since it does not fit with the overall strategic objective of a positive and comprehensive relationship with China.<sup>72</sup> Congress would potentially support this option, if China does not to cooperate on key economic issues, but would be reluctant to increase DoD budgets for more military forces in USPACOM. The policy would likely result in the ends of U.S. continuing to be the dominant security presence in the Western Pacific. However, this strategy will not foster a positive and cooperative relationship with China, and thus fails the suitability test.

A final policy to assess is a hybrid approach with U.S. changing to a more assertive strategy for military engagement, based on increased U.S. alliance engagement, and a shift in focus of U.S.-China military-to-military relations to non-traditional defense areas. The strategic ends are the same as the status quo policy with U.S. and China having a mature military relationship in order to prevent miscommunication and miscalculation. The ways to this policy differ by shifting the military-to-military relationship primarily to non-traditional defense areas such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, combating terrorism, and anti-piracy operations to further confidence building between the two militaries. Key to this option is engagement in areas where U.S. and China have more common security interests, which are in the areas the PLA calls “military operations other than war”.<sup>73</sup>

Accordingly, U.S.-China would establish military exercises supporting humanitarian assistance training, and conduct selected humanitarian and disaster relief deployments together. Other than war operations are a growing field for a rising China with global interests, and are not as controversial as other military exchanges related to tactical ground, air, and naval operations. The other aspect of the policy is increasing military engagement with U.S. traditional allies, which provides additional leverage to convince China to sustain military relations. Focus of diplomacy remains developing a political environment where trust is possible between senior government officials and military leadership.

The third policy option is feasible from a resources perspective, since it will not add more military force structure to the USPACOM AOR. However, exercises with PLA in non-traditional defense areas will require adjusting USPACOM exercise schedule to

enable units to participate in humanitarian exercises with China. The current U.S. administration and Congress will find this strategy acceptable since it maintains an engagement policy combined with a strong military presence in Asia-Pacific. U.S. allies support continued engagement with China, and want sustained U.S.-China defense relations leading to a stable Asia-Pacific region.

Finally, China will find this new option more acceptable, since it embraces engagement in less controversial areas where they can garner more domestic support. For the suitability criteria, this policy has the best chance to reach the goal of maturing the military relationship, since it focuses on areas of common interests, and with increased U.S. allies' engagement impacts Chinese interests by encouraging the PLA to weigh the costs of less contacts with U.S. military. Ultimately, the hybrid strategy of non-traditional security cooperation with China, and more engagement with allies appears to be the right U.S. policy option choice.

### Recommendations

U.S. should consider shifting the existing engagement policy to more military contacts in non-traditional defense missions, since they are more likely to serve American and Chinese interests. Sustaining military relations requires China to see more military exchanges as a benefit compared to the cost of preserving their core interests. With CMC already directing the PLA to conduct new “historic missions” in other than war operations, the PLA has guidance to increase humanitarian and disaster relief operations outside of China.<sup>74</sup> The U.S. military has vast experience in disaster recovery missions in Asia-Pacific. Consequently, humanitarian assistance represents the best opportunity for U.S and China to increase security cooperation, build trust, and support stability in the region.

Understanding China's military diplomacy approach is essential to crafting a sound U.S. military relations strategy. The PLA conducts military engagement as a strategic activity supporting CPC political goals, and do not see mature military relations with U.S. as an end in itself. Chinese leader perceptions of interests will continue to drive the pace and timing of PLA military exchanges. China's more assertive foreign policy with a growing list of Chinese core interests will also make steady military relations more difficult. U.S. policy makers will have to understand the limitations of military relations, and at times lower expectations for future security cooperation. A key goal should be to keep the dialogue open with the PLA so we can work together where our interests converge, and agree to disagree where our interests diverge.<sup>75</sup>

U.S. should conduct military relations with China from a position of strength. A strong U.S. forward military presence in Asia-Pacific combined with close cooperation with allies increases the opportunity cost to China of not sustaining U.S. military relations. China understands power politics, and when U.S. comprehensive power is respected more not less cooperation is likely. Moreover, when U.S.-China military relations falter, U.S. and allies military power will remain as security guarantor in the Pacific theater.

Based on recent trends, the next U.S.-China military crisis could be another USNS *Impeccable* type incident in China's EEZ. Currently, there are no established rules or procedures for U.S. and China to follow to respond to a military crisis event. MMCA talks have not delivered a rules-based approach to safety on the sea or in the air. The time has come for the U.S. to pursue additional agreements with China beyond MMCA for specific guidelines on maritime interaction between the two militaries. A

reinforced MMCA agreement similar to the successful U.S.-Soviet Union INCSEA would reduce the chance of a tactical incident turning into a greater strategic conflict.

### Conclusion

The U.S. and China relationship is the most important bilateral relationship in the world. Military relations are a critical aspect of this relationship. There is a high cost to adversarial military relations, which is another Cold War or a major war in the Pacific. Unfortunately, competing interests, lack of trust, and different U.S.-China approaches have hindered sustained and reliable military contacts. Finally, the rise of a China with global economic interests and a more assertive foreign policy also impacts the fundamental nature of the relationship.

The difficulty of stable U.S.-China military relations challenges U.S. defense policy options. In the past, U.S. policy has been to push for greater military contacts, while the PLA reluctantly engages based on their core interests at the time. The U.S. policy approach has not significantly improved communication with the PLA, influenced China's strategic choices, or enhanced mutual understanding. However, this fact does not mean the U.S. should not stop trying to improve military relations as part of a larger U.S. defense strategy in Asia-Pacific. The cost of abandoning military relations is too great, since isolating the PLA will inevitably lead to more distrust and fear of U.S. intentions. The best U.S. future policy approach is to continue the engagement strategy backed by strong relations with allies, and increase military-to-military interaction with China in non-traditional defense areas of common security interest.



## Endnotes

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